

“John Dickinson: A Great Worthy of the Revolution”

Biographical Profile
John Dickinson: The Politician

A careful man who was also meticulous and demanding of those around him, John Dickinson, achieved greatness as a politician in the years before the American Revolution. His popularity and fame eventually came crashing down when his convictions kept him from signing the Declaration of Independence.

Dickinson's political career began when he was 27 years old. He was elected to represent Kent County at the Delaware Assembly which met in the New Castle Court House in 1759. From that point forward until 1792, John Dickinson's life revolved around the political arena in Philadelphia and Delaware.

Born into a Quaker family, John Dickinson was also the son of a wealthy tobacco planter. His place in society was determined at birth. That we would someday take a part in the running of his country was also predetermined. Because of his family's wealth, Dickinson made good use of the opportunity to study abroad in England. At Middle Temple, part of the Inns of Court in England, he studied law, but found Constitutional law and history the most satisfying. This proved to be invaluable training when the English Constitution came under great scrutiny during the years before the Revolution. But, ingrained in him from his studies at Middle Temple was the belief that the British Constitution was a good and fair document.

Though a birthright Quaker, Dickinson's religious conscience was greatly influenced by his devout mother and wife. As time went on, the family with their Quaker connections persuaded John to take his religious background more seriously. This included embracing the belief that no man could own another human being and therefore slavery was no abomination.

John Dickinson's political experiences varied, but he never strayed far from his ideals or family upbringing. He began a busy political career by supporting the Pennsylvania Proprietorship against efforts by Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Galloway to make it a royal colony. This conservative attitude continued throughout his career. He felt the British Constitution provided rights to the colonists as well as the British citizens. He also felt that the “Colonial” problems could be addressed peacefully and through Constitutional means.

After leading the moderate position up to the Declaration of Independence, Dickinson finally realized that a separation was inevitable. Even though he finally supported the majority and their efforts to attain separation, he could not with good conscience sign the document, because he had not been a part of the process. Those convictions earned Dickinson much contempt.

Dickinson was equally firm in his conviction that slave trading must be abolished. During the process of writing the U.S. Constitution he lobbied for that measure to be included. Again, he was not among the majority and slave trading was not addressed in the document.

Another of Dickinson's strong ideals were his thoughts on national government. And in this battle he won. His influence was strong in the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution of the United States, as he was involved in the writing of both documents. Before the Revolution, Dickinson believed in a weak national government, with strong individual states. After the Revolution, he was convinced that the nation would only survive with a strong unified government. Each document mirrors those beliefs.

Best known in history as "The Pennsylvania Farmer," John Dickinson preferred to be known as a man with strong convictions. His determination to stand by his views won him both praise and scorn. He wanted "...to make an immense bustle in this world...", but he settled for being true to himself and eventually his God.